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Press Contact: Cynthia Fontayne
The Fontayne Group, Santa Monica.
310/ 452-1225 fax 310/ 452-7784 email tfginkhq@aol.com

Legal representation: Myron Greenberg, Esq., Larkspur Landing, CA

NELSON RESPONDS TO CHARGES IN 'WIRED' MAGAZINE ARTICLE

Los Angeles, June 7, 1995 -- Ted Nelson, founder of Project Xanadu, officially responded today to charges and characterizations in an article on the Xanadu project featured in the June 1995 issue of WIRED magazine.

The following is a summary of his remarks.

"The June issue of WIRED magazine contains an extremely nasty and mean-spirited article entitled 'The Curse of Xanadu,' by Gary Wolf, which purports to be the obituary of Project Xanadu. The article is an affront to Xanadu's alumni and veterans, some fifty of us over the years.

"The merely factual errors begin in the first sentence. (A list of errors in Wolf's piece, and related material, will be found on the Web at <http://xanadu.net/wolfsbane>, opening June 8.) More importantly, I believe the article contains material which is **false, damaging, and dishonest in reporting, thereby meeting the legal test of libel:**

1. the article contrives to make our endeavors look impossible and asinine;
2. the article materially misstates the intentions of the Project Xanadu and our technical assertions;
3. the article severely damages the "Xanadu" trademark, which (Wolf neglects to mention) has been divorced for two and a half years from the software he takes such pains to misrepresent and malign;
4. The article falsely portrays my colleague and partner Roger Gregory as an ignorant "repairman" of computers, in over his depth, and specifically denies that he was a "computer scientist" or "elite researcher;"
5. the article claims that my work in the 1960s and 1970s was "absurd," based on "inability," "ignorance" and "fantasy."

"All of these points, 1 through 5, are taken up in my letter to the editor of WIRED, which will be available as of 8 June 1995 by automatic responsebot on the net; just send any email to libel@xanadu.net. In what follows I will concentrate only on Point 5, which I choose as a battleground on which to make a stand.

THE CHARGES OF MY "IGNORANCE"

"Let's get to specifics. After thirty-five years of hard work and idealism in the computer field, my principal two assets are the "Xanadu" trademark and a certain reputation for foresight in the fields of hypertext and hypermedia. Both of these assets the article seeks libelously to destroy (1-- see endnote).

"For openers, here's a quote that merely says I lacked technical knowledge in 1965:

The inventor's original hypertext design predicted most of the essential components of today's hypertext systems. Nonetheless, his talk to the Association for Computing Machinery had little impact. There was a brief burst of interest in this strange researcher, but although his ideas were intriguing, Nelson lacked the technical knowledge [emphasis Nelson's] to prove that it was possible to build the system he envisioned.

"This is especially interesting because the original paper is quite clearly written, allowing today's reader to explore the luminous strangeness of this charge. [Media note: original paper available today.]

"The 1965 ACM paper proposes that individuals (including scholars and novelists) be given a system that allows them to work at computer screens (a very radical idea at the time) and be given a specific structure to help tie their work together. I believe the paper is straightforward and makes sense, and I invite the press and public to read it and see. You may not like the structure I propose, but it is not technically difficult and never was. (Computer programs for implementing and maintaining this structure under Unix, in the Tcl language, is available from the Sapporo HyperLab).

"I cannot help but see the heart of the article as an endeavor by Wolf to destroy any claim I might have to real foresight or prescience with respect to electronic media, saying rather that my work was based on "ignorance" and "fantasy."

Had Nelson been able to delve into the technical reasons for which computer people found his plans for Xanadu unconvincing, he might have been too discouraged to continue. The kinds of programs he was talking about required enormous memory and processing power. Even today, the technology to implement a worldwide Xanadu network does not exist. Back in the '70s, when Nelson was still waging the first phase of his campaign, even simple word-processing programs required users to share time on large mainframe computers. The notion of a worldwide network of billions of quickly accessible and interlinked documents was absurd, and only Nelson's ignorance of advanced software permitted him to pursue this fantasy. [Emphasis Nelson's.] The inventor was like a vaudeville performer practicing an acrobatic routine on the edge of an unseen cliff. A look into the abyss would doubtless have sent him tumbling.

"In this extraordinary piece of linguistic craftsmanship, Wolf has done the seemingly impossible: making a grave charge, extremely damaging in its purport, conjoining the words "absurd," "ignorance" and "fantasy" in reference to the core of my early work, striking to kill.

"Though the charge is strange and contorted, the ferocity and harsh intent of Wolf's statement, and his varied assertions of my ignorance, *considered as a whole*, require that the magazine back up this accusation. [See legal note 1.]

MODEST DEMANDS

"In a letter to them being transmitted today, I am demanding that Mr. Wolf, and the editors and publishers of WIRED, translate this accusation into a specific and testable set of charges concerning, and material to, the grounding and validity of my work, ideas and predictions in the 1960s and 1970s. (We are not disputing all the charges, because we are constrained by certain nondisclosure agreements regarding proprietary material from discussing some of them in detail.)

"I demand that Mr. Wolf, and the editor and publishers of WIRED, restate their charges as a testable bill of particulars,

open to the judgment of its readership and of courts of law, regarding my "inability to delve," "ignorance of advanced software," "lack of technical knowledge" and "absurd notions;" insofar as they may have been material to the clarity, lucidity, grounding and validity of my work, ideas and predictions in the 1960s and 1970s; identifying specifically any detectable technical errors, deficiencies, exaggerations, gaps or lacunae, false assumptions, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, shortcomings, fantasies, hallucinations and "absurd notions" as they may be able to exhume, anywhere in my designs, predictions, published articles, or recorded speeches; whether leading me to think either the wrong thing, OR the right thing BY MISTAKE, as is so quaintly averred; so that such defects may be subject to public verification or disproof; so that we can settle clearly *whether I was right for some wrong reasons or whether I was right, period*. This will help properly to assess the degree of damage from these remarkable accusations.

"On the other hand, it may be that out of this slipshod story people get a chance to enjoy and appreciate some of my early work.

"WIRED magazine is a well-funded, lavish, and very successful magazine with connections throughout the upper reaches of the computer industry, so Wolf had ample resources to research these matters thoroughly and to get them right. Therefore his supremely well-honed literary craftsmanship can leave little doubt of his malicious and destructive intent.

"Perhaps Mr. Wolf's is the "inability to delve;" but I am afraid it is worse than that. I believe he has possessed background information which he has chosen to disguise in his inexplicable striving to discredit the Xanadu enterprise and me. Mr. Wolf is at best disingenuous.

"Mr. Wolf is indeed himself an innovator in electronic media. By combining the word processor and the poison pen he has created a literary genre all his own. But to quote him once more:

In books, television, and radio, the truth is a slave to a good story, and convincing lies are remembered while dry, factual refutations are forgotten.

"Indeed. Well, I say let us remember properly. That is the Xanadu ideal."

Theodor Holm Nelson

1. Legal note: A VERY BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE LAW OF LIBEL.

Just because you don't like what is printed about you doesn't mean that you have a cause in action for libel. In American law, "libel" generally refers to circulating **damaging** statements which are **untrue**, through either **negligence or malice**. Publications are generally given more leeway under libel law than individuals because of the importance of a free press. Note, however, that libel can consist of statements which are ambiguous or even true; consider that one can malevolently say "The captain was sober last night" in such a way as to give the impression that the captain is an habitual drunk. Thus the law may treat damaging statements **holophrastically**, i.e. as a whole, with respect to what they appear to say, rather than restricting consideration only to precise details of individual statements.